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Relaxation: The Anti-stress

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In our fast-paced culture, stress has become the norm rather than the exception. Busy workers, homemakers and students are living lives with little margin. As a result, relieving stress is a multibillion-dollar industry dominated by pharmaceutical intervention. Unfortunately the answer for too many has become the procurement of illegal drugs, alcohol or prescription medication to anesthetize the brain rather than address the cause of stress. Why? Drugs and alcohol provide an immediate, but temporary, relief to stress and don't require users to change their lifestyle.

For those who want to get off the hamster wheel of stress, both physical and psychological relaxation techniques offer viable and healthy alternatives.

Relaxation therapy

Relaxation therapies differ in philosophy and method. The goal is to use the power of the mind and body to achieve a sense of relaxation. Relaxation therapies often focus on repeating a sound, word or prayer. They may focus on a body sensation. Relaxation therapies can reduce physiological stress and make a person feel relaxed.

There are numerous approaches to relaxation. The three main categories include deep or rhythmic breathing, systematic relaxation of muscle groups, and meditation and prayer.

Deep or rhythmic breathing

Stress constricts blood flow, reduces oxygen and disrupts mood. Breathing techniques help to regulate and improve oxygen levels, resulting in a calming effect. Here are three common breathing exercises:

- **Deep breathing**—As you think about your breathing, consider that you are filling your entire body with life-giving oxygen. Focus on breathing into your tummy; let your lungs and stomach rise and fall with each deep breath. With every long, slow exhalation, you will feel more relaxed.
- **Rhythmic breathing**—Stress is associated with increased heart rate and respirations. You can slow down your breathing by taking long, slow breaths. Focus on your breathing. Inhale slowly, and then exhale slowly. Count to three as you inhale, and then count slowly to three as you exhale. As you exhale, pay attention to how your body responds. Find a breathing rhythm that is comfortable, and remember it.

- **Visualized breathing**—Breathe in a deep, natural rhythm. Think about your breath coming into your nose, traveling into your lungs, expanding your chest and then going out the same way. Continue breathing, but each time you inhale, imagine that you are breathing in more relaxation and breathing out the worries of the day.

Progressive muscle relaxation

The body responds to stress with muscle tension. Progressive muscle relaxation involves learning to systematically tense and relax your muscles. By forcing yourself to tighten your muscles, you will more readily recognize the physical manifestation of stress and how to relax.

This technique involves the voluntary tensing and relaxing of muscles throughout the body. For example, when you simultaneously clench your fists, shrug your shoulders and wrinkle your forehead for five seconds and then relax, you will immediately discern the feeling of relaxation.

Meditation

When you think about a problem over and over again it's called worry. When you focus your mind on other things such as life's purpose, your loved ones, a "Higher Being," it's called meditation. Meditation usually involves sitting quietly for 15 to 20 minutes. It can produce a state of relaxation that reduces heart rate, slows breathing and lowers blood pressure.

Specifically, meditation is the practice of focusing your attention on things beyond the worries of the day. During meditation, you may focus on a single image, sound, mantra (words spoken or sung in a pattern) or your own breathing. Or, you may not focus on a single thing but try to let your thoughts and feelings simply pass through your mind.

Types of meditation include:

- **Autogenic training**—Participants imagine being in a peaceful place with pleasant body sensations. The person focuses on the body and tries to make parts of the body feel heavy, warm or cool. Breathing is centered and the heartbeat is regulated.
- **Mindfulness meditation**—Participants focus on body sensations and thoughts that occur in the moment. The person learns to observe sensations and thoughts without judging them.
- **Prayer and reflection**—For those who believe in the love and healing power of a "Higher Being," quiet prayer can be a calming and relaxing experience.

Like exercise, meditation and relaxation take time. Unfortunately, the most stressed-out people seldom make the time to experiment with these healthy alternatives to stress and worry. As one busy manager told me, "If I had the time to sit and think about my breathing for 20 minutes, I wouldn't be so stressed."

If you are having trouble with stress and would like to learn more about how to cope, talk with your family doctor or call the toll-free phone number on this site.

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